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AUTHOR Turnage, Martha; Moore, Roderick
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ABSTRACT

Mountain Empire Community College has a commitment to preserve, learn, and teach the heritage of mountain folk. Community participation by those who can teach the heritage of the area is a part of the implementation of this commitment. Some of the older people in the MECC service area either take the course work in folklife or come to the classes and serve as resource persons, activities that give the older people a renewed feeling of self-worth, stimulate a new pride in mountain life, and help to bridge the generation gap. In the first year of the college's operation, over 4,500 persons participated in the semi-annual Home Crafts Days, during which older craftsmen demonstrate and teach crafts once considered essential for survival in the mountains, such as shoeing mules, quilting, carding wool, and building barns. These activities have stimulated the interest of individuals, community groups, local television, and the Children's Television Workshop, which filmed the building of a log barn. Students go out into the region on field work assignments to talk to and work with craftsmen and musicians. A record album of local music is being prepared, and a cooperative venture with the Virginia State Parks called Tunnel Crafts brings demonstrations and exhibits of music and crafts to a local State park on weekends. The college is also planning the development of a summer Virginia Folklife and Culture Seminar for public school teachers. (KM)

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HOME CRAFTS DAYS AT MOUNTAIN EMPIRE COMMUNITY COLLEGE BRIDGE GENERATION GAP IN MOUNTAIN YOUTH'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

By Martha Turnage and Roderick Moore

The most striking difference between the life of today's mountain youth and that of their parents and grandparents lies in the nature of daily work. Technological developments have eased the lot of the mountain family, while dooming the home craftsman to extinction. No longer must a family be a self-contained producing unit for food, clothing, and shelter.

This vital tradition of American life has almost completely disappeared except for areas like Southwest Virginia where isolation has kept the tradition alive. Here many of the older people still practice home crafts more characteristic of an earlier era of Americana. Apple butter is cooked over open fires in copper kettles, and farmers fashion drag sleds; sassafras tea is brewed in open pots, and whittling is a way of life for the spinners of tall tales.

Sensitizing the young people of Southwest Virginia to their heritage in a creative and positive setting is crucial to their sense of identity. Comic strips and television promotion of the ridiculous hillbilly have brought about an identity crisis for many mountain youth, causing many of them to be ashamed and to reject their heritage.

In a day when pride in ethnic heritage is being widely acclaimed all over America, the Appalachian youth is defensive about the popular stereotypes of mountain folk. Society generally has not recognized the ingenuity displayed by mountain folk in the art of survival. The

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out-migration of young people from Appalachia speaks not only of lack of economic opportunity, but of the struggle in their search for identity. Appreciation of mountain culture in scholarly circles is demonstrated by the rich archives in educational centers.

For years scholars and folklorists from California to New York have come to the Southern Highlands to study its music, folk life and culture. Archives on Appalachian Life have been established in California, Pennsylvania, New York and Washington, D.C., but an archive of Virginia Mountain Life and Culture has not been established in Virginia. Mountain Empire Community College could well become a focal point for the preservation of this heritage.

When George B. Vaughan became president of Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) located at Big Stone Gap, Virginia, he made a commitment to the people of this Southwestern tip of the Commonwealth. Preservation of the heritage of mountain folk became a part of the mission of the College. As an educational institution, this commitment carries with it the necessity for teaching and learning, as well as preserving. Therefore, community participation by those who could teach this heritage of the area became a part of the planning in determining the thrust of the College. A first step was taken when Roderick Moore, a native of Southwest Virginia who did his graduate work in American folk culture in Cooperstown, New York, was employed by the College. He works with traditional craftsmen of the region in addition to teaching American and Virginia folklife and introduction to crafts.

When MECC students in the folklife classes began working on field projects, they went first to their own families. They were amazed to

hear from their parents and grandparents the same stories, music and crafts they were studying in books in class. The wealth of knowledge that surrounds them became a source of continuous discovery and excitement. "Generation gaps" offer positive learning opportunities for MECC students as they rediscover their own families.

Some of the older people in the MECC service area take the regular course work in folklife and prove a ready source of information. Many others come to the classes and serve as resource persons for the courses, giving first-hand information on folk culture in such areas as music, home remedies, rituals and customs.

The use of older people as resource persons in folk culture could happen anywhere in Virginia. At Mountain Empire Community College, students are giving older people a renewed feeling of self-worth as they contribute their rich storehouse of knowledge and experience toward developing a mountain life archives at the College. As students and older people work together in preserving mountain culture, a philosophy of life is communicated in the process. A new pride in mountain life is being manifested locally as an outgrowth of these experiences, bridging generation gaps between the older and younger mountain folk.

As a dramatic expression of the awakening of the area to the richness of its heritage, over 4500 persons participated in the semi-annual Home Crafts Days the first year of operation of the College.* Despite a deluge of rain that cancelled the hog killing at the first Home Crafts Day in December, 2000 people came to the campus. They made apple cider, clogged, quilted, carded wool, and sang. Since Home Crafts Days are not "come and see" but "come and do" days, spectators became participants. College

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*November 3, 1973, and May 4, 1974, will be the dates of the next Home Crafts Days.

students work with the older craftsmen and lead the way for others to take part in the fun.

Governor Linwood Holton returned to his home town on May 16, 1973, to dedicate the College. At that time he expressed the wish that "Eastern outlanders could come to see the way of life exemplified in the survival crafts demonstrated at Home Crafts Days." He recognized the vital role the College will play in the preservation and promotion of the crafts, arts, music and life styles of this region of the mountains of Virginia. However, these days have not gone unnoticed by the media.

Television coverage of Home Crafts Days has been remarkable for a new venture. The Kathy Thornton WDBJ-TV show in Roanoke has presented three half-hour documentaries of the first Home Crafts Day. Children's Television Workshop filmed the log barn raising, and Woman's Day magazine covered the event from the standpoint of the young learning from the older people.

Home Crafts Days are not arts and crafts fairs, nor music festivals. They are days when older craftsmen and musicians in the community come together on the campus of Mountain Empire Community College and share skills characteristic of their life style. Many of the older citizens who come for these days would probably never have ventured near a college otherwise. The craftsmen who are demonstrators/teachers probably never realized before that others would be interested in their skills. They have felt modern society had no place for those who can build a drag sled, split shingles, churn butter, build a log barn or shoe a mule.

By concentrating on crafts essential for survival in the mountains, Home Crafts Days have identified a group of people who possess an untapped rich resource of expertise in mountain culture. Older people were once

the teachers in the community, but societal change has often left them with the feeling that no one wanted to hear what they have to say. Bringing these older craftsmen and musicians back into their true roles as cultural bearers has strengthened a sense of identity for MECC students. Student participation in the spring more than tripled from the first Home Crafts Day when they were no longer suspicious of the intent.

Many methods have been used to identify the traditional musicians and craftsmen. In field work assignments, students discover neighbors who make pawpaw pies--play the banjo--plant crops by the almanac. It is a revelation to the young folks to discover that things they had taken for granted all their lives have been recorded in books and films. They are discovering a new wealth in the hills. Now that the older people in the community realize what Home Crafts Days are, they call the College and say, "I can still do thus and so -- maybe you'd like me to come up and demonstrate it." All it costs the College is a free lunch for participants.

Community groups are beginning to be involved. Band boosters from Powell Valley High School made apple butter in the fall and manned the concession stand in the spring. At the spring Home Crafts Day, the Duffield Ruritan Club organized a horse pulling contest. They will be in charge of the apple butter stir-off this fall. The building of a log barn, supervised by Howard Ledford from the community (who also split the shingles for the roof), is the single most ambitious undertaking to date. Local people and students took great pride in the fact that Children's Television Workshop in New York City which produces Sesame Street and the Electric Company, filmed the entire process.

When students knew the log barn raising was to be filmed, they wanted to know how the culture of the area was to be portrayed. "Are they going to show us as hillbillies and laugh at what we're doing, or as people who still practice skills that are almost lost?" was the general concern. Both Mr. Ledford and the drafting students who built the barn were pleased with the documentary approach of the filming. The camera crew was delighted with the results. One of the photographers asked Mr. Ledford why he left cracks between the logs. He replied, "That's to let life in."

People in the community who come to the campus for Home Crafts Days remark, "Why, this is how things <u>really</u> were!" Many adults stir apple butter for the first time in years or nail shingles to the log barn roof.

Several nights a week students from the College, particularly veterans who have gained a new appreciation of the area, are out at filling stations and country stores identifying musicians. They listen to and play old-time music with the people, and invite them to the campus for Home Crafts Days. Eventually it is hoped that there will be a series of Home Crafts Days record albums, distributed by Mountain Empire Community College and recorded by a company in Big Stone Gap. The first record album of music from Home Crafts Days, "Home Folks," will be available this fall. The second is by Kate Sturgill, a local balladster, playing and singing her own songs. George Reynolds, a student at the College and continuing education instructor of guitar, produced the albums.

Students from the College work with the community people in other ways as they pursue field work assignments in folklife. Last fall Crafts Production students helped Orey Spears in Big Hill, Virginia with a molasses stir-off. They gathered cane in the field, skimmed foam, and worked side-

by-side with him for about fifteen hours. Others helped Otto and Worley Reed and their mother make apple butter in a 20-gallon copper kettle.

Another important community aspect of the total crafts program at MECC is Tunnel Crafts, a cooperative venture between the College and Virginia State Parks. This is located at Natural Tunnel State Park in Scott County in the College's service area. At Tunnel Crafts students from the Crafts Production Curriculum at the College demonstrate pottery making on the weekends, and develop the exhibits in the crafts shop. Traditional craftsmen from the area also come on the weekends to demonstrate. Traditional musicians play at the Park periodically. Park Superintendent Gilmer Bledsoe states that this program has increased attendance of local people at the Park by 20-30 percent this first summer. Families come to see students do a raku firing, a sheep-to-shawl demonstration, or to enjoy the music and drama at the Park.

MECC students are beginning to ask in folklife classes why one must wait till college to discover the positive aspects of their heritage. "I just wish my younger brothers and sisters could take this course and learn to be proud instead of ashamed of who they are," one student told Mr. Moore. Moore himself had to leave Virginia to learn the richness of the life style of his own family in graduate school classes in Cooperstown, New York.

Looking toward this problem, Mountain Empire Community College is planning the development of a Virginia Folklife and Culture Seminar for public school teachers in the summer. Teachers from all regions of the State can be trained in Virginia folk culture at Mountain Empire Community College. Units of folk culture can be incorporated into the social studies programs of elementary and high schools. These programs could bring the school and community closer together and build support from a segment of the society usually completely separated from public education.

The roots of the area have been noted by visitors to Home Crafts Days from other places. The diplomat's wife from Nepal who visited in the spring discovered many similarities in folk culture between the two counties. Some university students from Richmond who visited last spring said they consider this region a cultural center in the sense of European cultural centers. "I sense roots of America here that I have not experienced anywhere else in America, even in Yorktown," one said. During the Bicentennial Celebration, these are the kinds of contributions Southwest Virginia can make. The kinship with the earth that is frantically sought in Surbubia is part of daily life in the mountains.

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